Imperial Twilight: The Opium War and the End of China's Last Golden Age, by Stephen R. Platt. New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 2018.

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A historical narrative can be a successful page-turner. And Stephen Platt proves it again with his new book *Imperial Twilight: The Opium War and the End of China's Last Golden Age*, a sequel to the author's last work *Autumn in the Heavenly Kingdom* (Knopf, 2012) which won the Cundill History Prize (the largest international prize for a history book). Reading into it will at once bear out the contention that good stories are true stories. Platt's mature and solid treatment of rich historical materials lays out a complex and multifaceted picture before the First Opium War (1839–1842) in the Chinese and British imperial history. According to the author, the pivotal question he concerns is not "how Britain won," but "how Britain could have come to fight such a war in China in the first place—against, it should be noted, savage criticism both at home and abroad." (Introduction, xxiv) What the author digs out from his reexamination of the materials on both sides is indispensable for a good understanding of historical period from the mid-18th century up to the outbreak of the war: it is the principal figures, not the impersonal forces, that made the history. The firm stand made by this claim can be strongly sensed throughout the whole story.

It is a vivid, thoroughly-researched, and character-driven story with rich details. Such an entertaining narrative demonstrates Platt's rare ability to deliver remarkably the complexity of a history subject. Concerning matters of writing style, the book certainly ranks among the upper echelons of scholarly works. Its language is fluent and beautifully written. His expert account of British aggression in 19th-century China is well-paced. To portray a historical period of such kind, the author must possess an excellent command of sources. The work contains three parts (PART I, chapt.1–6; PART II, chapt.7–12; PART III, chapt.13–15.), an introduction, a prologue, and a coda. The titles of part one and three, "Gracious Spring" and "Blood-Ravenous Autumn" respectively, display a traditional Chinese worldview, because "*chunqiu*" (spring and autumn) in Chinese represents not only two seasons, but age, time, years or history as well. More interestingly, it could also allude to the writing style of *The Spring and Autumn Annals*, one of the five Confucian canons. Part three is entitled as "The Milk of Paradise" and the English poet Samuel Taylor Coleridge (1772–1834) wrote a poem "Kubla Khan" in which the "milk of paradise" is well-known for its metaphorical representation of opium. This

book is no doubt an exemplary combination of historical literature and scholarship. Platt's excellent skill in dealing with the tensions and contradictions lies in every well-told episode of outstanding lucidity and vividness. It holds the readers' attention across a historical period before the First Opium War and presents a fascinating challenge to the prevailing assumptions of the buildup to the confrontation.

The book is a thought-provoking contribution to the scholarship of the First Opium War, for it offers the readers an invigorating and enriching experience in viewing the relations between the two trade partners from a perspective of global history. To upend the stereotype that "China typically appears as an unchanging backdrop, a caricature of unthinking traditions and arrogant mandarins stuck in the ancient past," Platt aims to "give motion and life to the changing China that lay beyond the confines of Canton in the early nineteenth century(xxvii)." None of the important events is untouched by the novel perspective: "the rebellions, the spread of corruption, and the economic troubles that preoccupied the country's rulers and formed the wider context for the issues of foreign contact that lie at the story's center." (xxvii) He also focuses his study on a balanced treatment of the principal figures of the period. Platt's compelling reassessment of the emperors, government officials, rebels, and "reform-minded Confucian scholars who proposed creative and pragmatic solutions to the problems of their time" on the Chinese side, and the British and American traders, explorers, missionaries, government agents, and smugglers, "who tried to get beyond their limited confines in Canton" on the Western side expresses vividly on a historical site of conflicting political and cultural processes. And it is the author's goal that both sides of the story "are meant to give the reader a broader vision of this grand eclipse of empires in the early 19th century" (xxviii). Readers will be interested if they seek a global angle on the First Opium War as well as the 19th century geopolitics.

However, some points made in the author's revisionist commentary at the end of the book seem puzzling. In the last Chapter "Aftermath," the commentary section starts with a question: "Did it have to end that way?" (p.447) I am not sure whether this "sorry-it-happened-but-I-didn't-mean-to-hurt-you" attitude is what the author tends to boil down to, hopefully not; but if so, this part will obviously backfire on all previous chapters. The author reiterates here what he emphasizes in the "Introduction" that the war is neither "a result from an intractable clash of civilizations," nor "the culmination of some grand imperial master plan" (xxviii). According to him, the result would have been totally different, "if just five members of the House of Commons had voted differently in the early hours of April 10, 1840" (p.448). It is fair to say that Britain should not be blamed for the Chinese had been consuming opium for centuries. And the keyword in the "East India Company," as everyone should note, is "India" not "Britain." Naturally, nothing

seems to be wrong or immoral for the British troops to protect the free trade. Yet free trade does not always mean legal trade in history, just as legitimacy does not necessarily equal to justice and righteousness. The consequence of pursuit of profit at any cost was, is and will be catastrophic. Without mutual understanding and cooperation, a confusion of cultural suspicion will lead easily to non-negotiable hostility and full-blown conflict between any two trade partners. History often leads us into a direction that is unforeseeable, but the principal figures who make history are people with clear motives and intentions.

In Chapter 12 "The Last Honest Man," the central topic focuses on the legalization of opium trade in China. Charles Elliot (1801–1875) is depicted as a remarkable British trade representative who "understood about imperial politics" so much and so well, "despite being new to China and having no understanding of the language at all." (p.335) And based only on some rumors and a translation of the Chinese official Xu Naiji's (1777–1839) memorial, Elliot was very optimistic about the approval of the opium legalization in China. Yet it turns out that the Chinese government did not move forward with it as quickly as he had thought it would. Thus, Platt writes: "The opium trade was shaping up to be a national embarrassment for Britain, but its voluntary legalization by China could be their way out." (p.337) Even by October 1838, when "Daoguang Emperor was leaning heavily in favor of suppression," and Xu Naiji was severely punished and suffered from political demotion, "Charles Elliot still labored under the illusion that Xu Naiji's proposal to legalize opium was right on the brink of approval." (p.353) Therefore, it is safe to conclude that Charles Elliot was mistakenly convinced that he perfectly understood the other's culture.

The war was inevitable. If it could had been as simple as just adding five more votes, shouldn't it have been easier to arrange a meeting in India, so that the Chinese Emperor and the British Queen could sit down together laughing away the problems? To fulfill a grand imperial trade plan, wedging a war might not be the only way out, but it is certainly one of those immediate and effective solutions. The clash of civilizations was actually not unavoidable, as was proved by the First Opium War. And it will become an even more intense and frequent issue in a globalized world today. The point is: we need to ponder more on how to solve a similar problem in the future, and argue less whether it was this problem that resulted in the war. To seek mutual understanding and cooperation requires any two stake-holders, first and foremost, to deal with everything on an equal footing. Platt prompts every reader to reflect carefully on the relations between big nations, and pushes many theoretical debates forward.

The four "if" assumptions (p.448) in the commentary echo a book review on the *New York Times* ("The Opium War and the Humiliation of China," July 8, 2018) which regarded this work as "a masterpiece of the 'If Only' school of history": "If

Charles Elliot had not let his panic get the best of him when he so dramatically overreacted to Lin Zexu's threats. Or if Lin Zexu himself had been more open to working with, rather than against, Elliot; if they had cooperated on their shared interest in bringing the British opium smugglers under control. Or if just five members of the House of Commons had voted differently in the early hours of April 10, 1840—we might be looking back on very different lessons from this era." (p.448) And it brings us back to the central and moral question the author concerns most: if only the savage criticism both at home and abroad could stop Britain from fighting such a war in China in the first place! And I believe most readers will also agree that it could be possible, but only if the Second Opium War (1856–1860) did not take place in history. Overall, Platt's beautifully written book is a welcome and important addition to the study of the First Opium War and should attract interest from a wide range of scholars and general readers.